

Chapter 1

Children have their play on the seashore of worlds.

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Tamil Nadu, India

The sea was quiet at first light on the morning their world fell apart. They were sisters—Ahalya the older at seventeen and Sita two years her junior. Like their mother before them, they were children of the sea. When their father, a software executive, moved the family from the plains of Delhi to Chennai on the Coromandel Coast, it felt to Ahalya and Sita like a homecoming. The sea was their friend, its pelicans and pomfrets and crested waves their companions. They never believed the sea could turn against them. But they were young and understood little of suffering.

Ahalya felt it when the earth shook in the dawn twilight. She looked at Sita sleeping in the bed beside her and wondered why she didn't awaken. The tremors were violent but ceased quickly, and afterward she wondered if they had come in a dream. No one stirred in the house below. It was the day after Christmas, a Sunday, and all India was asleep.

Ahalya snuggled into her blanket, inhaled the sweet, sandalwood scent of her sister's hair, and drifted off to visions of the peacock-blue *salwar kameez* her father had given her to wear to the conservatory in Mylapore that evening. It was December and the Madras Music Season was in full swing. Their father had bought them tickets to a violin concerto at eight o'clock. She and Sita were both students of the violin.

The household awoke in stages. At a quarter past seven, Jaya, the family's longtime housekeeper, swaddled herself in a sari, retrieved a

small jar of limestone powder from the bureau at the foot of her bed, and went to the front porch. She swept the earth beyond the threshold with a stiff-bristled broom and placed dots of the white powder on the ground. She connected the dots with elegant lines and traced the star shape of a jasmine flower. Satisfying herself, she placed her hands together, palms flat, and whispered a prayer to Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of fortune, for an auspicious day. The *kolam* ritual complete, she went to the kitchen to prepare the morning meal.

Ahalya woke again when the sunlight streamed through the curtains. Sita, always an early riser, was nearly dressed, her sable hair shiny and damp from a shower. Ahalya watched her sister apply her makeup in front of a small mirror and smiled. Sita was a fine-boned girl blessed with the delicate features and wide, expressive eyes of their mother, Ambini. She was slight for her age, and the magic of puberty had yet to transform her body into the figure of a woman. As a result, she was self-conscious about her appearance, despite regular reassurances from Ahalya and Ambini that time would bring about the changes she so desired.

Partly to keep pace with Sita and partly to avoid being late for breakfast, Ahalya dressed hurriedly in a yellow pantsuit, or *churidaar*, and matching scarf. She slipped on bangles and anklets and completed the ensemble by fastening a necklace around her neck and placing a delicate jeweled *bindi* on her forehead.

“Ready, dear?” Ahalya asked Sita in English. It was a rule in the Ghai household that the girls could speak Hindi or Tamil only if spoken to by an adult in that language. Like all Indians privileged to rise into the ranks of the upper middle class, their parents dreamed of sending them to university in England and firmly believed that a mastery of English was the likeliest ticket to Cambridge or Oxford. The convent school where the girls boarded taught Hindi—the national language—and Tamil—the indigenous tongue of Tamil Nadu—along with English, but the convent sisters preferred to speak English, and the girls never quibbled with the rule.

“Yes,” Sita said wistfully, casting a fading glance toward the mirror. “I suppose.”

“Oh, Sita,” Ahalya chided her, “a frown will not endear you to Vikram Pillai.”

The comment had the effect Ahalya intended. Sita's face brightened at the mention of the family's plans for the evening. Pillai was her favorite violinist.

"Do you think we'll get to meet him?" Sita asked. "The line after the show is always so long."

"Ask Baba," Ahalya said, thinking of the surprise she and her father had planned for Sita—and had succeeded in keeping secret. "You never know with his connections."

"I'll ask him at breakfast," Sita said and disappeared through the door and down the stairs.

Chuckling to herself, Ahalya followed Sita to the living room. Together, the girls performed their *puja*, or morning worship, before the family idols of Ganesh, the elephant god of luck, and Rama, avatar of Vishnu, who stood on an altar in a corner of the room. Like most members of the merchant caste, the Ghais were predominantly secular and visited a temple or shrine only on rare occasions when seeking a boon from the gods. However, when the girls' grandmother came to visit, the incense sticks were lit and the puja prepared, and everyone—small and great—participated in the ritual.

Entering the dining room, the sisters found their father, Naresh, their mother, and their grandmother assembled for breakfast. Before seating themselves, Ahalya and Sita touched their father's feet in a traditional sign of respect. Naresh smiled and gave them both a peck on the cheek.

"Good morning, Baba," they said.

"Good morning, my beauties."

"Baba, do you know anyone who knows Vikram Pillai?" Sita asked.

Naresh glanced at Ahalya and winked at Sita. "I will after tonight."

Sita raised her eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

Naresh reached into his pocket. "I was going to wait until later, but since you asked . . ." He pulled out a VIP pass and laid it on the table. "We'll meet him before the performance."

Sita looked at the pass and a smile blossomed on her face. She knelt down slowly and touched her father's foot a second time.

"Thank you, Baba. Does Ahalya get to come?"

“Why, of course,” Naresh replied, placing three more VIP passes beside the first. “And your mother and grandmother as well.”

“We can ask him anything we like,” Ahalya chimed in.

Sita looked at her sister and her father, and her smile knew no bounds.

While the sisters took their seats at the table, Jaya darted around the room, placing bowls brimming with rice, coconut chutney, *masala dosa*—potato-stuffed crêpes—and flatbread, called *chapatti*, on the table. The food was eaten without utensils, and by the end of the meal everyone’s fingers were lathered with the remnants of rice and chutney.

For dessert, Jaya served freshly picked *chickoo*—a kiwi-like fruit—and *mysore pak*, a fudge-like delicacy. Cutting into a chickoo, Ahalya recalled the early morning temblor.

“Baba, did you feel the earthquake?” she asked.

“What earthquake?” her grandmother inquired.

Naresh chuckled. “You are fortunate to sleep so soundly, Naani.” He turned to his daughter with a reassuring smile. “The quake was strong, but it did no damage.”

“Earthquakes are a bad omen,” the old woman said, clutching her napkin.

“They are a scientific phenomenon,” Naresh gently corrected. “And this one was harmless. We have no need to worry.” Turning back to Ahalya, he changed the subject: “Tell us about Sister Naomi. She wasn’t well when I saw her last.”

The family finished their treats while Ahalya told her father about the headmistress at St. Mary’s. A breeze blew through the open windows, cooling the air. In time, Sita grew fidgety and asked to be excused. After obtaining Naresh’s permission, she pocketed a square of *mysore pak* and dashed out of the house in the direction of the beach. Ahalya could not help but smile at her sister’s vivacity.

“May I go, too?” she asked her father.

He nodded. “I think our little Christmas surprise was a good idea.”

“I agree,” she replied. Rising from the table, she donned her sandals and followed her sister into the sunlight.

By twenty minutes past eight o'clock, everyone but Jaya and the girls' grandmother had left for the beach. The family's modest bungalow sat on a piece of waterfront property fifteen miles south of Chennai and a mile down the beach from one of coastal Tamil Nadu's many fishing communities. The location was rural by Indian standards, and Ambini, who grew up in the overcrowded neighborhoods of Mylapore, found it remote. But she had considered the sacrifice of distance from the city a small price to pay for the chance to raise her children so close to her ancestral home.

Ahalya walked along the beach while Sita raced along the waterline collecting conch shells. Naresh and Ambini strolled behind them in contented silence. The Ghais made their way north in the direction of the fishing village. They passed an older couple sitting quietly on the sand and two boys tossing rocks at the birds. Otherwise, the beach was deserted.

Shortly before nine o'clock, Ahalya noticed something strange about the sea. The wind-driven waves washing ashore didn't reach as far across the sand as they had only minutes before. She studied the waterline, and the sea seemed to retreat before her eyes. Soon fifty feet of sodden sand lay exposed. The two boys, shouting with delight, chased one another across the spongy surface toward the departing ocean. Ahalya watched the spectacle with foreboding, but Sita was more inquisitive than concerned.

"Idhar kya ho raha hai?" Sita asked, reverting to her native Hindi. "What is happening?"

"I'm not sure," Ahalya replied in English.

Ahalya saw the wave first. She pointed to a thin line of white stretched across the edge of the horizon. In less than ten seconds, the line expanded and became a roiling surge of water. The wave approached so rapidly that the Ghais had almost no time to react. Naresh began to shout and wave, but his words were drowned out by the hungry thunder of the wave.

Ahalya reached for Sita's hand and yanked her toward a stand of palm trees, straining against the resistance of the soft sand. Brackish water swirled around her legs, and then the wave was upon her, buoying her up and tumbling her over. Saltwater filled her nostrils, clogged her ears, stung her eyes. She began to choke, to retch, even as she reached for the light. Breaking the surface, she gasped for air.

She saw a blur of movement, a flutter of color—Sita’s turquoise churidaar. She clutched her sister’s hand but lost it again in the violent suction of the wave. Her fingers brushed the smooth bark of a palm. She lunged toward it, desperately kicking against the current, but again her grip failed. As the sea swept her inland, she shouted blindly, imbuing her words with all her fading strength: “*Swim! Sita, grab a palm tree!*”

Swiveling around, she saw the trunk of the palm a split-second before impact. As the pain exploded in her forehead, she wrapped her arms and legs around the tree and willed herself not to let go. Then she lost consciousness.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw blue sky peeking through wind-tossed fronds of palm. The silence around her was eerie. Her heart hammered in her chest and her head felt as if it had been cleaved in two. Seconds passed and then the sea began to retreat, yielding once again to the land. She saw Sita’s face in the distance and heard a shout.

“Ahalya, help me!”

She tried to speak, but she had saltwater in her mouth. The word came out as a croak: “Wait.” She spat once and tried again: “Wait! Sita! Wait until the water goes down.”

And it did. At last.

Ahalya inched down the trunk of the banana palm until her feet met sodden ground. Her churidaar was in tatters, her face covered with blood. She waded across the distance to Sita and pried her arms free from the trunk that had saved her. Clutching her younger sister protectively, Ahalya looked through the palm forest toward the beach. The gruesome sight did not register at first. The thorn bushes that lined the sand were stripped of leaves. Around them, dark shapes floated on the surface of the muddy waters.

Ahalya stared at the shapes. Her chest heaved. At once she knew.

“*Idhar aawo!*” she commanded Sita in Hindi. “Come!”

Taking her sister’s hand, Ahalya led her through the knee-deep water. The first body they discovered was Ambini’s. She was covered in mud, and every inch of exposed skin was lacerated by thorns. Her eyes were open and her face was a mask of fright.

The grotesque transfiguration of their beloved mother turned Sita to stone. She clasped her sister’s hand so powerfully that Ahalya cried out

and yanked it away. Ahalya fell on her knees weeping, but Sita just stared. After a long moment, her mouth fell slack and she began to sob. Burying her face in her hands, she trembled so violently that she appeared to be in seizure.

Ahalya took her sister in her arms and held her close. Then she took her hand and led her away from Ambini. Before long, they saw another body. It was one of the local boys. Sita went rigid. Ahalya all but carried her along the swampy ruins of the beach in the direction of the family's bungalow. She knew their only hope was to find their father.

Had Sita not stumbled, they would have passed by Naresh's remains. Stooping to help her sister up, Ahalya glanced inland and saw yet another dark mass floating upon the becalmed remains of a saltwater lagoon. The wave had swept Naresh through the palm forest and trapped him among some boulders at the edge of the lagoon.

Ahalya dragged her sister across the short distance to Naresh's body. For a long moment, she stared at her father uncomprehending. Then understanding dawned and she began to weep as the crushing weight of sorrow settled upon her shoulders. She was Naresh's favorite, as Sita was Ambini's. He could not be dead. He had promised to find her a respectable husband and to give her an enviable wedding. He had promised so many things.

"Look," Sita whispered, pointing to the south.

Wiping away her tears, Ahalya followed her sister's gaze across an alien world stripped bare by the wave. In the distance stood their bungalow. The familiar silhouette took Ahalya by surprise, as did her sister's sudden stillness. Sita had ceased her crying and was hugging herself in self-protection. The sight of her eyes so fraught with pain infused Ahalya with courage. Perhaps Jaya or her grandmother had survived. She couldn't bear the thought that she and Sita were entirely alone.

Ahalya took a deep breath and clutched her sister's hand. Wading across the submerged landscape, the girls made their way to the remains of the home they had known for nearly a decade. Before the arrival of the wave, the grounds around the bungalow had been a nature preserve of flowering gardens and fruit trees. Soon after moving the family from Delhi, Naresh had planted an *ashoka* tree near the house in honor of Sita.

As a child, she had played beneath the evergreen sapling and imagined her namesake, the heroine of the Ramayana, rescued by Hanuman, the noble monkey god, from captivity on the island of Lanka. Now the ashoka and all of its verdant companions were matchsticks denuded of leaf, branch, and flower.

Sita paused beside the skeleton of her beloved tree, but Ahalya tugged at her hand and insisted she keep moving. The windows on the lower floor of the bungalow were washed out, and furnishings that once had graced the living area now floated in the yard. Still, the house seemed sound. As the girls approached the wide-open front doors, Ahalya listened for a human voice but heard none. The house was quiet as a crypt.

She stepped into the foyer and wrinkled her nose in the dank air. Looking into the living room, she saw her aged grandmother floating facedown in the murk beside a mud-encrusted couch. Fresh tears sprang to her eyes, but she was too exhausted to weep. The discovery of the old woman's remains did not shock her. After finding her father, she had half-expected that her grandmother, too, had perished.

Summoning the last of her resolve, Ahalya waded through the living room to the kitchen, praying desperately that Jaya had survived. The housekeeper had been a fixture in the Ghai family for longer than Ahalya had been alive. She was like a member of the family, unique and indispensable.

When Ahalya entered the kitchen trailing a limp and pliant Sita, she found a wasteland of debris. Overturned baskets, containers of detergent, glass jars stuffed with sweets, and stray mangoes, papayas, and coconuts floated on the stagnant waters. Beneath the surface, pots, pans, bowls, and silverware littered the floor like sunken wrecks. But there was no sign of Jaya.

Ahalya was about to leave the kitchen and search the dining room when she noticed that the wooden door to the pantry was ajar. She saw the hand before her sister did and wrenched open the door. Wedged into the cramped confines of the pantry was Jaya. Of all their departed family members, Jaya was the most peaceful in death. Her eyes were closed and she looked as if she were asleep. But her skin was cold and clammy to the touch.

The vertigo came without warning and Ahalya nearly fainted. Standing there in calf-deep water, the truth of their predicament hit her. She and Sita were orphans. Their only surviving relatives were aunts and cousins in distant Delhi, none of whom she had seen in many years.

Just as the thought crossed her mind that all hope was lost, Sita reached out and took her hand. The sudden sensation of touch stirred Ahalya to action. Shouldering again the responsibility of the firstborn, she led Sita up the stairs to their bedroom.

The wave had scaled the steps and mired the floor, but the second-story windows and furniture remained intact. A single thought occupied Ahalya's attention—finding her purse and mobile phone. If she could contact Sister Naomi and find a way to escort Sita to St. Mary's in Tiruvallur, they would be safe.

She recovered her purse from the bedside table and dialed Sister Naomi's number on her mobile. As the phone began to ring, she heard the sound of distant rumbling coming from the east. She moved to the window and looked out at the silt-stained surface of the Bay of Bengal. She couldn't believe her eyes. Another wall of water was hurtling toward the beach. In seconds, the noise of it escalated into a throaty roar and drowned out the voice on the other end of the line. "Hello? Hello? Ahalya? Sita?" Ahalya forgot about Sister Naomi. Her world narrowed to her sister and the second killer wave.

The churning mass of water reached the bungalow and flooded the lower floor. The house shuddered and groaned as the wave hurled itself against the foundations. Ahalya slammed the bedroom door and urged Sita onto the bed. Wrapping her trembling sister in her arms, she wondered whether Lord Shiva had chosen water over fire to bring about the end of the world.

The terror of the second wave seemed to last forever. Briny water poured in through the cracks around the bottom of the bedroom door and fanned out across the floor. The sisters huddled in a pile of blankets as the water level rose. At once the house shifted beneath them and the floor tilted at an angle. The bedroom door burst open and brown water rushed in. Ahalya shrieked and Sita buried her head in the damp fabric of Ahalya's soiled churidaar. Ahalya closed her eyes and mouthed a prayer to

Lakshmi to absolve the sisters of their sins and assure them safe passage into the next life.

In that place of dissociation, she barely noticed when the noise diminished and then ceased. The house stood firm as the current reversed and the second wave retreated to the sea. The sisters sat unmoving on the bed. The ravaged world left behind by the waves seemed eerily bereft of sound.

“Ahalya?” Sita whispered at long last. “Where are we going to go?”

Ahalya blinked and her mind reengaged. She let go of her sister and felt the weight of the phone in her hand. Numbly, she pressed the familiar numbers.

“We need to get to St. Mary’s,” she said. “Sister Naomi will know what to do.”

“But how?” Sita asked, hugging herself. “There is no one to drive us.”

Ahalya closed her eyes and listened to the ringing of the phone. Sister Naomi picked up. Her words were anxious. What had happened? Were they in danger? When Ahalya spoke, her voice seemed far away. A wave had come. Her family was dead. She and Sita had survived, but their home was destroyed. They had no money, only the phone.

The line crackled with static for long seconds until Sister Naomi found her voice. She instructed Ahalya to walk to the road and catch a ride into Chennai with a neighbor.

“Go only with someone you trust,” she said. “We will be waiting for you.”

Ahalya ended the call and turned to Sita, trying to look confident. “We must find someone with a car. Come now. We need dry clothes.”

She led her sister across the room to a chest of drawers. She helped Sita peel off her wet, soiled garments and handed her a clean churidaar. Then she changed her own clothing. She tried the sink, hoping to wash her face, but found no water pressure. They would have to live with the grit coating their skin until they reached St. Mary’s.

Sita moved toward the door, ready for the journey, but Ahalya stopped to collect a photograph from the bureau. The image showed the Ghai family at Christmas a year before. She removed the photo from its frame and slipped it into the waistline of her churidaar. She also retrieved a wooden box and placed it and her phone in a cloth satchel. The box

contained gold jewelry the sisters had received as gifts over the years—the sum of their collective wealth. Ahalya took one last look at the room and nodded in farewell. The rest she would leave behind.

The sisters descended the stairs and waded through the foyer to the front yard. Outside, the sun was hot, and the standing water left by the second wave had begun to reek with the odor of dead fish. Ahalya led Sita around the back of the damaged bungalow and out onto the lane. The family's two vehicles, both parked in the driveway before the arrival of the waves, were nowhere to be seen. Ahalya thought to take a last look at the bungalow, but she resisted. The ruined world left by the waves was not the home they had known. The former world, and the family that inhabited it, lived now only in their memory.



When they reached the main road, they found it awash with debris from the palm forest. Ahalya felt a twinge of despair. Who would venture out on the roadway in such conditions? A thought came to her then: perhaps they could catch a ride with someone from the fishing village. She knew it was a long shot. Most of the villagers lived in seaside huts that probably had been leveled by the waves. But the survivors would need to obtain provisions and assistance from Chennai. Before long someone from the village would have to make the trek.

The sisters walked side by side without speaking. For nearly a mile they saw no sign of life. All ground-level vegetation had been swept away, leaving the earth on both sides of the tarmac naked and forlorn. By the time they reached the outskirts of the fishing village, they had begun to sweat heavily, and their throats were parched with thirst. Even in winter, the South Indian sun was merciless in its intensity.

Ahalya led the way down the road to the fishing community. As they neared the shoreline, they saw a man wearing a muddy white skirt, or *lungi*, walking toward them with a child in his bare arms. Behind the man was a bedraggled line of fisherfolk, carrying palm baskets on their heads and colorful satchels on their shoulders.

The man stopped in front of Ahalya. “*Vanakkam*,” she said in the customary greeting. “Where are you going?”

The man was so agitated that he didn't acknowledge her question. Pointing and gesturing wildly, he told her about the waves.

"I was in my boat," he said. "I felt nothing. When I returned, everything was gone. My wife, my children—I don't know what happened to them." He turned around and swept his hand across his ragtag band. "We are the only ones left."

Ahalya absorbed the man's grief and steeled herself against her own. She focused instead on practical things.

"Your chieftain has a van," she said. "Where is it?"

The man shook his head. "It is wrecked."

"And your drinking water? Surely you kept drums from the monsoon."

"They were washed away."

"Where are you going?" Ahalya asked again.

"Mahabalipuram," the man replied. "We have relatives there."

Ahalya tried to conceal her disappointment. Mahabalipuram was five miles in the wrong direction. "We must get to Chennai."

The man stared at her as if she had lost her mind. "You will never make it."

Ahalya took Sita's hand and spoke with defiance. "We will make it."

The sisters accompanied the villagers back to the main road, where they parted ways.

"We should go to Kovallam," Sita said softly, speaking for the first time in many minutes. "Maybe we could catch a bus."

Ahalya nodded. Kovallam was a larger fishing community two miles to the north. Even if they couldn't find a bus, she felt reasonably certain that they could get filtered water at the Kovallam market. Water was her first priority. Transportation would have to wait.



The miles passed slowly in the tropical sunlight. A breeze blowing in from the ocean brought occasional relief from the heat. Otherwise, the trek was monotonous and painful. Their sandals, soaked and sand-encrusted, made the soles of their feet raw with blisters.

By the time they reached Kovallam, Sita's face was locked in a

perpetual grimace, and Ahalya was having difficulty maintaining her composure. From the angle of the sun, she judged that it was nearly eleven o'clock in the morning. Unless their luck turned, they stood little chance of reaching the convent by nightfall.

The village of Kovallam was a hive of activity. Oxcarts and wagons vied with cars and pedestrians on the narrow, waterlogged roads. Ahalya stopped an old woman wearing a mud-splattered sari and inquired about a bus to Chennai. The woman, however, was beside herself with grief.

"My son," she cried. "He was on the beach. Have you seen him?"

Ahalya shook her head sadly and turned away. She asked a man carrying a basket of ripe bananas for help, but he stared at her blankly. Another man trailing a cart loaded with grapes responded to her with a curt shake of the head.

"Don't you know what happened here?" he demanded, spitting a stream of *paan* juice on the street. "No one knows whether the buses are running."

Ahalya struggled against a sudden riptide of desperation. She knew if she didn't stay calm, she could make a rash decision and endanger them.

She led Sita into the Kovallam market. As she expected, only a few stalls were unshuttered. She asked a cane juice vendor whether he could spare a bottle of water. Mustering her best smile, she explained that the wave had taken her purse and that she had no money. The vendor gave her an unsympathetic look.

"Everyone pays," he said brusquely. "Nothing here is free."

Taking Sita by the hand, she approached a vendor of vegetables. She told him their circumstances and he responded with pity. He gave them bottles of water and a patch of shade beneath an umbrella.

"*Nandri*," Ahalya said, accepting the water and handing a bottle to Sita. "Thank you."

They took their leave of the sun and drank thirstily. After draining her bottle, Sita leaned her head on Ahalya's shoulder and dozed. Ahalya, however, resisted the urge to sleep and searched the market for a familiar face. Her father knew a number of men in Kovallam, but she couldn't recall their names.

As time passed and she recognized no one, she began to calculate

the street value of the jewelry hidden in her satchel. How much would it cost to hire a driver to take them to Chennai? Her instinct cautioned her against securing a taxi, but she had seen no buses pass through the market, and she doubted any would make the trip that afternoon. She and Sita could not make it to Chennai by foot, at least not that afternoon, and she knew of no place outside the city where they could spend the night in safety.



The girls rested for over an hour in the shade of the umbrella. Sita didn't stir, and Ahalya finally drifted off to sleep. When she awoke, she saw that the sun had passed its zenith. She had to make a decision soon.

She turned toward the vendor to ask about a driver, but at that moment something triggered in her memory. A face in the crowd. A dinner reception in Mylapore earlier that year. The man had greeted her father warmly, and her father had responded in kind. Ahalya couldn't recall the man's name, but she never forgot a face.

She pinched Sita awake and told her not to move. She wove her way through cows, automobiles, and rickshaws and approached the man.

"Sir," she said, speaking in English, "I am Ahalya Ghai. My father is Naresh Ghai. Do you remember me?"

The man looked at her and broke into a grin. "Of course," he replied with crisp English diction. "I am Ramesh Narayanan. We met last spring at the Tamil Historical Society." His look turned to puzzlement. "What are you doing here? Are you with your father?"

The question pierced Ahalya. She looked away from Ramesh while she collected herself. In halting speech, she told him the truth about her family.

The blood drained from Ramesh's face as she spoke. He struggled to find something appropriate to say. Finally he asked, "Where is your sister?"

Ahalya motioned toward the vegetable vendor's stall. "We are headed to our convent school in Tiruvallur. The sisters will take care of us."

Ramesh glanced back and forth between Ahalya and Sita. "To reach Tiruvallur, you will need a ride."

Ahalya nodded. "We walked this far, but Sita is very tired."

Ramesh pursed his lips. “We are in the same position then. The bus I was on is no longer running. I’ve been trying to find a driver to take me back to Chennai.” He paused and gave her a smile. “Don’t worry. I will make sure you arrive in Tiruvallur by nightfall. It is the least I can do for the daughters of Naresh Ghai.”

Ahalya was nearly overcome with relief.

“Wait with your sister,” Ramesh said. “I will come for you as soon as I can.”



Sometime later Ramesh returned with a wiry man dressed in a loose-fitting shirt, or *kurta*, and a pair of khaki pants. The man had gaunt cheeks, cold eyes, and a scar on his chin. He looked at the sisters and then nodded to Ramesh. Ahalya felt an instinctive distrust toward the scar-faced man, but she had no option but to accept Ramesh’s help.

“Where are we going?” Sita asked, a slight tremor in her voice.

Ramesh answered her. “This man—Kanan is his name—has a truck with four-wheel drive. He is the only person in all of Kovallam willing to brave the road after the waves, and his price was remarkably fair. We were lucky to find him.”

Ahalya took her sister’s hand. “It’s all right,” she said.

Staying close to Ramesh, the sisters trailed Kanan through the marketplace toward an alleyway draped with brilliantly colored fabrics. The truck—a dust-coated blue Toyota—had seen better days. It stood battered and rusting beside an apothecary’s shop. Ahalya, feigning claustrophobia, declined Ramesh’s invitation to ride with Sita in the cab and motioned for her sister to climb onto the flatbed. The idea of sitting so close to the scar-faced man repulsed her.

Kanan started the engine and engaged the clutch. The truck shuddered and lurched forward. After navigating the streets of Kovallam, he took the highway toward Chennai.

The waves had turned the scenic coastal plain into a silt-infested swamp and the roadway into a mud flat. The truck made slow headway across the crust of sand. Although there was no traffic on the road, it took them an hour to reach Neelankarai, the southernmost suburb of

Chennai, and another hour to reach Thiruvanmiyur, two miles shy of the Adyar River. The waves had destroyed many of the coastal dwellings, flooded roads, overturned cars, and washed fleets of fishing boats ashore. The East Coast Road was overwhelmed with pedestrians, and traffic moved at a glacial pace.

Half a mile south of the river delta, traffic halted altogether. Horns blared and drivers shouted obscenities, but nothing dislodged the unseen logjam. After ten frustrating minutes, Kanan reversed course and took an inland road toward St. Thomas Mount. The sun was low in the sky when they crossed the river by way of the bridge at Saidapet. The thoroughfares north of the river showed no signs of damage.

The driver turned east toward Mylapore and the coast. Ahalya took a small measure of comfort in the chaotic dance of cars, trucks, buses, bicyclists, and auto rickshaws. She squeezed Sita's hand to reassure her.

"We'll be there soon," she said, delivering a smile that found no reflection in her sister's eyes.

"What will we do?" Sita asked.

"I don't know," Ahalya admitted.

She fought against the grief tugging ceaselessly at her heart, but this time the pressure was too great. Tears spilled down her cheeks, burning her eyes and tickling her chin. She took Sita into her arms and promised Lakshmi on her father's grave that she would allow no harm to come to her. She would be a mother to her. She would make the sacrifices necessary to ensure that Sita would find life on the other side of the horrors of this day. Her sister was her charge.

She could not fail.



A few minutes before six o'clock, the truck stopped beside an upscale complex of flats. The shadows were long upon the tree-shaded lane, and the sun was close to setting. Ramesh climbed out of the cab, smoothed his shirt, and gave the girls a sympathetic smile.

"I regret that I can't take you all the way to Tiruvallur," he said, "but I have an engagement in Chennai this evening. I have paid Kanan to take you the rest of the way."

He gave Ahalya a business card with his mobile number. "I can't express how sorry I am for your loss. Call if you should ever have a need." With a slight bow, he bid them farewell.

Kanan didn't speak to the sisters after Ramesh left them. He placed a brief call on his mobile phone and then turned the truck around and headed northwest toward the city center. They crossed the Kuvam River and took a left on a major thoroughfare. Kanan navigated through the traffic toward the western suburbs.

All was well until they passed through the intersection at Jawaharlal Nehru Road. Without warning, Kanan took a left into an industrial park.

"*Neengal enna seigirirgal?*" Ahalya demanded of him, knocking on the cab window. "What are you doing?"

Kanan ignored her and drove faster down the dirt road. They entered a neighborhood of dilapidated flats. Dirty children and mangy dogs milled about, men smoked in the shadows of doorways, and elderly couples sat silently on cramped terraces. The neighborhood was unfamiliar to Ahalya, but there were countless others like it in the city. It was a place where generations had eked out a living on the margins of society, a place where people looked the other way and didn't ask questions. Ahalya knew that if she cried out, no one would come to her aid. Her instincts had been correct. Kanan was not trustworthy.

She reached for her phone in her satchel. Just then, Kanan slammed on the brakes and the truck slid to a stop. Grabbing the phone, Ahalya hid it in her churidaar. She took in her surroundings. The truck sat at the end of a row of dingy flats beneath a high stone wall. The area was poorly lit and deserted except for a group of three men standing in the gloom. The men surrounded the truck, and the youngest one climbed onto the flatbed.

Stooping in front of them, he said, "You have nothing to fear from us. If you do what we say, we will not hurt you." He noticed Ahalya's satchel. "What do we have here?" he asked, reaching for the bag.

Ahalya clutched the satchel tightly. Without hesitation, the young man backhanded her across the face. Ahalya's cheek smarted from the blow and she tasted blood on her lip. Beside her, Sita began to whimper. The violence had been sudden and shocking. Ahalya handed over the bag.

The young man poured out its contents onto the flatbed and picked up the wooden box, unfastening its clasp. The jewelry sparkled in the light of a streetlamp.

“Kanan, you old bandicoot,” he said exultantly, holding up one of Sita’s necklaces, “look what you brought us! You must be blessed by Ganesha.”

“Good,” Kanan said, turning to a fat man with a pockmarked face, “then you can double my pay.” The fat man scowled and Kanan immediately retreated. “Okay, okay. Double is too much. Make it fifty percent.”

“Done,” the fat man said and counted out the bills. “Now get out of here.”

After the young man forced the girls out of the truck, Kanan hopped back in the cab, gunned the engine, and sped away in a cloud of dust.

The youth took Sita’s arm, and the fat man flanked Ahalya. The third of their captors, a bespectacled man with a silver watch, trailed behind. Ahalya’s heart pounded as the men led them into a dark hallway and up a flight of stairs. The door to a flat stood open. A *hamsa* charm was strung above the doorway as a talisman against the Evil Eye.

The men ushered the girls into the living room. An overweight woman in a sari sat on the couch watching television. She glanced up at the girls and then returned to her program. The youth and the fat man shook hands with the bespectacled man, whom they called Chako. The fat man spoke briefly to Chako in low tones. Ahalya heard nothing of the conversation except the fat man’s promise to return in the morning.

Chako bid the others farewell and closed the door, locking two deadbolts. He turned to the girls with a neutral expression.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

Ahalya’s stomach rumbled. The thought of food had not entered her mind in hours. She traded a glance with Sita and nodded at Chako. Chako turned to the woman and spoke a terse command in Tamil. The woman rose from the couch, glared irritably at the girls, and made her way into the kitchen.

Minutes later, she emerged bearing two steaming plates of rice with chickpea and potato chutney and a pitcher of water. The sisters ate ravenously. The food was too spicy and the water lukewarm and

unfiltered, but Ahalya had long since ceased to care. They needed to bide their time until they were alone and she could place a phone call to Sister Naomi.



After the meal, Chako told the girls to sit on the couch beside his wife. He took a seat in a nearby chair. Chako's wife was riveted by a talk show that the girls' mother had never let them watch. A Tamil movie star was the celebrity guest, and the topic of conversation was her most recent production, a saccharine drama set amid the civil war in Sri Lanka.

Ahalya sat next to her sister in a state of mute disbelief. In a single day her family had been ravaged by the sea and she and Sita had been kidnapped. What did Chako and his wife want with them? Had other girls been imprisoned here, or were they the first? Ahalya recalled that Kanan had received a commission from the fat man. That suggested they had done this before. But why? What was their motive?

The show lasted an hour and then Chako switched the channel to an international news station. Ahalya and Sita sat up in their seats, captivated by footage of devastation wreaked by giant waves along the coastline of the Indian Ocean. Orphaned babies squaled in the arms of aid workers, women wailed in grief before the camera, and whole villages lay in ruins, felled by a wall of water that appeared without warning.

According to the anchor, the tsunami had started its journey in the tumult of a colossal earthquake off the coast of Indonesia. A succession of waves generated by the quake had spread outward from the epicenter at the speed of a jetliner. In the span of less than three hours, the tsunami had left untold thousands dead along the shores of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The station showed projections of the death toll. Some said fifty thousand people had perished. Others estimated five times that number. The scope of the catastrophe was unimaginable.

They watched television until ten o'clock. When Chako finally switched off the set, he led Ahalya and Sita into a small room furnished with two beds and a bedside bureau. Chako told the sisters they would

sleep on one bed and his wife would sleep on the other. The room had a window on the far wall, enclosed by rusting louvers and iron bars.

Chako's wife entered the room after a few minutes dressed in a nightgown and carrying a glass of water and two round pills. Chako told the girls that the pills would help them sleep. Thinking quickly, Ahalya trapped the pill beneath her tongue and swallowed only the water. Her phone was still hidden in the fabric at her waist; she intended to use it after everyone fell asleep. Chako's wife, however, probed her mouth with her finger and discovered the ruse.

"Stupid girl," the woman spat out, cuffing Ahalya on the back of the head. "You don't know what's good for you." She gave Ahalya the pill again and forced her to swallow it.

Chako took a look at his shiny watch and bid the sisters good night. Closing the bedroom door behind him, he turned the lock with an audible click. His wife sat down on the bed nearest to the window and fixed Ahalya with a nasty glare.

"There is no way out," she said. "Do not try to leave or Chako will bring a knife. Others have learned the hard way. And do not disturb my sleep."

Ahalya and Sita lay down beside each other on the bed. Sita cried silently into the sheets until she drifted off to sleep. Ahalya wrapped her arms around her sister like a protective shield, trying desperately to ward off the unseen forces that had turned their world into a nightmare. As the sedative took effect, Ahalya fought to stay awake, but the medication addled her mind and weighed down her eyelids.

With the last of her strength, she pushed her mobile phone deeper into her churidaar. Then her resistance gave way and she lost consciousness.